



## Voices of Critical Literacy: How Do Middle School Students, Teachers, and Preservice Teachers Respond?

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### ABSTRACT

In a test-driven society such as ours, the reasons not to take on the time-consuming and controversial topic of critical literacy are many; however, this article hopes to convince educators at all levels that the benefits of engaging students in questioning, reflecting, and taking action are well worth the effort. The article begins with a classroom example of critical literacy in practice, reports survey results of the attitudes of middle school teachers toward a social justice curriculum, and then addresses critical literacy challenges for future educators.

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~ Sarah

Sarah, a student in Susan Stolp's eighth-grade social studies class, is responding to the book *If the World Were a Village* by David Smith. Most of her classmates, although described by teachers as the "most difficult class in over a decade," had similar insights as a result of this picture book addressing social justice issues on a global scale. Some students were shocked that Chinese was the most spoken language on the planet. Others focused on the unequal distribution of wealth in the world. Many seemed concerned and angry at the injustice portrayed in the book. This powerful reaction to social justice issues by students often perceived as disengaged and disruptive, demonstrates the power of literature to evoke critical analysis of issues.



In this article, we discuss the process that led to Sarah and her classmates' insights, the attitudes of middle school teachers toward a social justice curriculum, and the critical literacy challenge for future educators. In a test-driven society such as ours, the reasons not to take on the time-consuming and controversial topic of critical literacy are many; however, we hope to convince educators at all levels that the benefits of engaging students in questioning, reflecting, and taking action are well worth the effort.

### **What is critical literacy?**

The term critical literacy has generated a wide range of perspectives that problematize literacy practices (Luke & Freebody, 1997), and there is no single version of what critical literacy should and could look like in middle-level classrooms. Across the range of viewpoints about critical literacy, there are some shared commonalities. In general, critical literacy advocates subscribe to the view that critical literacy is social in nature (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). From this perspective, literacy is always contextually-bound; thus it is important that students engaging in critical literacy work explore the situated context of the literacy act. This means that students and teachers involved in critical literacy activity are exploring how literacies connect them to one another and to others in far removed locations and contexts. A key aspect of this is the valuing of multiple forms of literacy shared by social groups, including the reading, interpreting and composing of print, as well as viewing, listening to, and creating non-print texts.

Critical literacy also recognizes that an inherent aspect of literacy practice is the negotiation of power (O'Brien, 2001). In this view, literacies are never neutral. In whatever form they take, literacies can convey power and can also be used to oppress. Thus, critical literacy asks questions about the power relationships communicated through literacy practices. Such questions include queries about who benefits from the text or practice, who is left out, and how accurate a text or practice is in representing certain groups or cultures. A central purpose of critical literacy is to challenge the status quo in an effort to foster equitable education. This entails challenging assumptions and oppression at the individual, social, and structural level. In this sense, the personal is intertwined with the political in critical literacy pedagogy. Students and teachers do not draw artificial boundaries between their experiences and identities and school experiences and learning. Instead, they acknowledge the existence of in-and-out of school literacies and the bridges that link them, they value personal perspectives and experiences, and they inquire into social justice for individual situations and groups.

In practice, critical literacy is dialogic in nature. From early roots in the work of Paulo Freire, dialogue has been central in the development of critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Dialogue is understood as engagement and exchange between people, institutions, and ideas. Although power is never absent in dialogue, critical literacy attempts to name and question power relations. Critical literacy asks questions about language, power, identity, and practice. There is an assumption that the answers to



critical literacy questions are not known beforehand; it reflects genuine and democratic inquiry in which teachers, students, and scholars are equal participants in the process.

### **A Portrait of Critical Literacy in a Middle School Classroom**

Prior to the use of *If the World Were a Village*, Susan hesitated to introduce the concept of social justice to her eighth graders. Although she had several highly motivated and conscientious students, she could not imagine the majority of the kids willingly participating in a discussion about social justice issues:

In an earlier social studies project, we had been discussing the concept of philanthropy, looking at Andrew Carnegie as an historical example. We studied the rise of big business and how some individuals, from very modest beginnings, had become incredibly rich amazingly fast. I had asked the students to write a reflective paragraph on whether or not they would contribute their great wealth (if they had been in this situation) to a philanthropic cause. About eighty percent of the students said that they would not! They would keep the money for themselves! It seemed that social justice was not something about which they had much concern. This is the reason I decided that I should introduce critical literacy to the class.

Wanting to address social justice in the curriculum, but not sure where to begin, Sue invited Joyce who had been researching critical literacy in children's literature, to come to class on two consecutive Friday afternoons. Joyce started the presentation by showing the students a picture of the earth from outer space, saying how this photo, taken within our lifetimes, but certainly not within theirs, had changed the way people viewed the world. The blue orb, seen with no political boundaries, appeared peaceful and calm; we could really feel that we were alone, together, in a vast universe. This was the beginning of what we now call a "global vision." I looked around the room and the kids' interest had been piqued. She had shaken up their world view, created a little disequilibrium, and their heads were ready for her presentation.

Whoa...that thing is huge! It's amazing how peaceful Earth looks from far away. ~ Leah

The picture of the earth is very cool...you're right...it does make you see that there are no boundaries except the ones we drew. I love how you can't see any one person. ~Dani



The world is a bigger place than we think and it's amazing! ~Macy

I don't see races, religion, or anything else. And as you look at this little planet you can understand how little all of our problems on Earth seem.  
~Sabrina

We began *If the World Were a Village*, by David Smith by having the students guess the world's population (6 billion, 200 million). As we proceeded through the book, the students were asked to predict the statistics that Smith states in the book, to write their predictions in the packet provided, and then to reflect in writing on each fact before sharing their thoughts. This built-in time for thinking and discussing proved essential for the students to absorb the impact of the statements.

In order to make the numbers more manageable, Smith scales the earth's population down to 100 members of the global "village." Susan's students were asked to calculate how many people each member of the village would represent (62 million). Sue reminisces:

While at first I thought any math connections would be rather elementary (these eighth graders were studying the Pythagorean Theorem and quadratic equations), I also realized that any review of fractions, percents, and ratios was never wasted. As I watched the feverish tapping of calculators and quickly scrawling pencils in the room, I knew the kids were hooked.

The next challenge was for students to guess which countries were the most populated. I asked them to convert the numbers representative of the 100 people in the global village to real numbers based on 1:62,000,000. Not surprisingly, most did not guess China as number one, although it has over four times the population of the United States.

"Languages" was the next category. When students learned that of the 100 people in the village, 22 speak a Chinese dialect, while only 9 speak English, 7 speak Spanish, and French and German do not even register a 1, many were shocked.

I'm amazed that there are so many languages and the order of the most spoken. ~Britta

It makes me feel stupid only knowing one and a half languages. ~Ian

French isn't on the list!?!? Why am I learning it then?! I won't be able to talk to nearly as many people. I should be learning Chinese! ~Sarah



Many students expressed their surprise over the fact that their guesses were wrong. Several of the students assumed that English was the most widely spoken language on the planet.

Another topic that got the kids actively engaged was the food issue: 50 people within the global village do not have a reliable source of food and are hungry all the time; 20 people are severely undernourished; only 30 people always have enough to eat. However, as the author states, “There is no shortage of food in the global village. If all the food were divided equally, everyone would have enough to eat. But the food isn’t divided equally” (p. 17). The students were stunned, and we saw some very insightful comments on the reflection pieces and questions the students were encouraged to ask:

Because of where I live and who I’m surrounded by, I always assumed the majority of the population had enough food. I can’t believe how off I was! Why am I in the 30% who always have enough to eat? Why can’t we learn to share? When will we start? ~Sarah

Why do we have people who are fat when so many are starving! ~Julie

It’s amazing how many people don’t have enough food. Also about how greedy rich people are, because they are the ones that could help the most. How long can people go without food, If they are already undernourished? ~Rachel

I find this really sad. It makes me angry at the world. ~Iliana

As a whole, the presentation was a huge success. Almost every student contributed to the discussion and to completion of the handout questions and reflections. Even some of my typically disengaged boys voiced their opinions:

I think we eat too much. We should share the food. ~Corey

I think this was interesting. I also think we should take into consideration many of these problems. ~Allan

Although this exercise certainly raised awareness, there was still some reference to survival of the fittest:

Lots of people are starving in the world and they need to eat. But it’s not our job to do it, it’s theirs. ~Nick



But overall, the students' responses, both in discussion and on paper, indicated that consciousness about social justice issues was raised. Many indicated their desire to be part of the change they wanted to see in the world:

I hope we can fix these problems soon! What can I do to help? ~Katy

Maybe people that are rich should really help people that are starving to death. ~Sonia

We need more people like Robin Hood! ~Tim

### **Critical Literacy, Social Justice, and Teacher Concerns**

One important aspect of critical literacy in the classroom context is that students and teachers are engaged in exploring social justice issues. (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Edelsky, 2006; Nieto & Bode, 2007). However, some teachers are reluctant to embrace critical literacy pedagogy due to a variety of perceived hurdles.

These student insights were the result of two 50-minute, Friday afternoon class periods. If students can become this aware and engaged in social justice issues in less than two hours, why aren't more teachers introducing critical literacy through social justice topics? In order to answer this question, we asked those middle school teachers who teach communication arts and social studies to complete a critical literacy survey. Thirty-nine surveys were distributed to middle school teachers in Susan's district. Of these, 15 were returned. Our goals were to determine 1) how many teachers were introducing critical literacy through social justice topics; 2) which social justice topics were being addressed and how; 3) if teachers were not addressing social justice topics, what would make it possible for them to integrate these topics into the classroom.

The results of the survey indicated that only one teacher, of the 15 who responded, did not address social justice issues in the classroom. We were initially elated at this response, until we realized that a positive response on this item merely meant that an issue was addressed at some point throughout the year. This would be the equivalent of a Level 1 in Banks' (2005) Levels of Multicultural Curriculum, since it might focus on an isolated occurrence; for example, many teachers listed Martin Luther King Day as a time to discuss racial prejudice. A higher level of engagement with social justice issues would create a classroom environment where students would be in the habit of questioning a text to know all perspectives, especially from those characters that were silenced or marginalized. Fortunately, additional survey items helped to sort out the presence of specific social justice issues in the curriculum.

Surveys demonstrated that social justice issues addressed included child abuse, homelessness, bullying, poverty, war, disabilities, environmental issues, racial prejudice, gender equity, and religion. Teachers who did not discuss these issues indicated that it



was because of a lack of time or because the content was not specifically required by the curriculum. When asked what would make it easier to address social justice issues, teachers reported that they would like to have more time, smaller class settings, time for discussion, quality materials, specific guidelines, and more information. All teachers felt that parents would respond positively to adding these issues to the curriculum.

### **What do preservice teachers and teacher educators need to know to implement a critical literacy curriculum?**

Susan's students' responses to *If the World were a Village*, her own astonishment at the level of engagement that occurred when the students were presented with a topic on social justice, and her fellow teachers' mostly positive responses to the survey all indicate that a critical literacy curriculum is possible. In addition, it creates a sense of hope for the future...even in the present era of high stakes testing and No Child Left Behind. In particular, it indicates that today's preservice teachers need to know that they will not only encounter peers who are interested in social justice and critical literacy, but more importantly, they will encounter many students who are motivated by involvement in a curriculum that addresses multiple literacies and encourages the exploration of issues pertaining to identity, power, and language.

How can preservice teachers learn about a critical literacy curriculum so that they, too, can encourage their students to ask questions similar to the children in Susan's class and also encourage them to take action? The answer appears to be twofold.

First, just as Susan learned to listen to the questions of her eighth grade students, those of us who are college educators need to listen to preservice teachers' questions as they will enable us to rethink our practice of literacy instruction. Just as the use of children's literature helped Susan's students explore social justice, the use of children's and young adult literature in the college classroom enables preservice teachers to ask questions such as "What IS social justice?" or "Can we REALLY discuss these issues in OUR classrooms?" Such questions help us move away from only addressing content that includes decoding and comprehension strategies (or the "five essentials") and enable us to move to a socio-cultural model of teaching that also includes the "essentials" of critical literacy and the exploration of identities and power (Freebody & Luke, 1999). In addition, it encourages preservice teachers to look at topics from multiple perspectives and with the realization that the content can be complex as well as dynamic (Freebody & Luke, 1999; Nieto, 2002). In so doing, it enables preservice teachers and college professors to begin to ask questions such as, "Whose voice is heard? Who is silenced? Whose reality is presented?" (Vasquez, 2003, p.15). When we model such a curriculum in our own teaching, it not only encourages preservice teachers to reflect on and rethink their practices but it also provides a framework for critical practice.

Second, it is also important to help preservice teachers consider ways that they can address barriers to a critical literacy and social justice curriculum that were mentioned in the survey (time, materials, additional information, adjusting to class size, and the need for guidelines) as well as establishing such a curriculum when high stakes



testing often drives what is taught. Preservice teachers need to know that many of these barriers are surmountable. Therefore, discussions with classroom teachers who include topics related to social justice, such as Susan, or with classroom teachers who have just started to incorporate strategies that promote critical literacy will serve as a springboard to addressing some of the tough, complex, issues and questions that are encountered in a thoughtful, critical literacy curriculum. They will also enable preservice teachers to reflect on and then act on Sarah's initial question "When will we start?"

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**Suggestions for Further Reading**  
**Examples of Critical Literacy in the Classroom**

Cowhey, Mary. (2006). *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades*.

Mary Cowhey invites the reader into her second grade classroom with stories of critical literacy in action as well as a detailed schedule on one day in the “Peace Class.”

McLaughlin, M. and DeVoogd, G.L. (2004). *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students’ Comprehension of Text*.

Teachers will appreciate these specific lessons for grades 1-8, based on children’s literature, with reader-friendly explanations of the critical literacy strategies used to discuss the books.

Vasquez, Vivian. (2004). *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*.

Vivian Vasquez demonstrates that even kindergartners understand social justice issues and are capable of taking action to make their classroom, their school, their neighborhood, and their world better places.